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ABSTRACT

Present methods of high school and college instruction in history, namely, the instructor centered approaches, have made the study of history irrelevant for many students, and hence objectives for teaching history are seldom realized. Even good lectures, and most discussion classes, result in the student acting as a passive observer, never establishing an individual relationship to the subject matter. If history teachers were to see their objective as making historians out of students, rather than creating knowing minds, they could help create independent minds capable of critical thinking, and an appreciation of the values of history. This methodological approach involves permitting students to do, on their own, what historians do--deciding what questions are worth answering, securing information from many sources; and critically evaluating those sources of information. While Latin American history is not under direct attack, it is not unaffected by the current crisis in history teaching. Unless instruction is personalized and aimed at teaching the historical skills, history will not be able to justify its existence in the curriculum. (JLB)

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THE TEACHING OF HISTORY:

A FEW REMARKS TO LATIN AMERICAN HISTORIANS

By

Joedd Price

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As a small boy, I wanted to build a birdhouse with my father's tools. I cut the first two boards at the wrong angle, and when I tried to hammer them together and succeeded only in bending the nails, my father, who had been observing me, volunteered to help. From that point, I stood by and watched him construct and paint a very beautiful birdhouse. Dad was an excellent carpenter, so good, in fact, that he could not bear seeing me build an imperfect structure. The finished product was beautiful, but I must admit that I learned, and still know, very little about carpentry.

I have begun with this story because I think it demonstrates what is currently lacking in many of our graduate and undergraduate courses in history. My thesis is that present methods of instruction in history -- the instructor-centered approaches -- have made the study of history largely irrelevant for large numbers of students and that the objectives for teaching history are seldom realized.

Last summer, as a member of the University of Delaware team, I participated in the History Education Project of the American Historical Association. During our first meeting at Indiana University, I was dismayed to hear such eminent American scholars as Charles Sellers of the University of California at Berkeley argue the possibility that

history would no longer be taught in the high schools of California. I had assumed that history, like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and the "Star-spangled Banner," was here to stay. Upon further inquiry, I found many members of the project contending that the study of history had very little to offer students. Their criticisms, they said, were strongly supported by other professional educators, social scientists, public school teachers and students, and even some historians. I became so annoyed that I was ready to return home. Then William Pulliam of the School of Education at the University of Delaware challenged me to compile a list of criticisms of history teaching and decide for myself whether or not they were valid. I accepted his challenge and spent hours in the Indiana University library reading various criticisms. Careful consideration of them convinced me that there was some basis for dissatisfaction with traditional methods of teaching history. I also concluded that historians should concern themselves to a greater degree with the search for better instructional methods. The latter, I thought, might pose a serious problem, considering the obstinacy with which the world of Academe tends to cling to traditional approaches. Also, historians are rather contemptuous of anyone concerned with methods.

Jacques Barzun vigorously expressed this negative attitude in his book, Teacher in America.

> "Methods" is a world in itself. Methods sustain the weary and comfort the poor in mind: for methods have all been worked out and tested. There is a method for supervising schools and another for being a principal. Every subject matter taught has its special method. Even janitorial method can be learned, and the method of teaching janitorial method also. Methods grow like fleas on one another ad infinitum. Whenever I hear of an instructor who is an "exponent" of methods, I see him at once as a small figure perched up to the right of a number, and I only wonder whether that is Number One -- or zero.[1]

This attitude has had two unfortunate effects on history teaching. First, it has led to our habit of giving insufficient attention to the valid criticisms of teaching in our discipline. Second, it has caused historians to ignore many new approaches to teaching and to perpetuate methods which often appear to have lost their utility. We can no longer disregard those who criticize the way we teach, nor can we afford to postpone searching for effective methods of teaching history.

Let me begin with the most serious criticism of history teaching in the university: the lecture. Lectures, according to some critics, can be generally characterized as being:

(1) dull, boring, unstimulating, and dreadfully long,
(2) repetitious,
(3) fact-loaded, to the point that both professor and students must have extensive notes in order to remember all of the information,
(4) text-oriented and chronologically organized,
(5) largely lacking in ideas, and
(6) quite often unrelated to the needs of the student.

In addition, professors who deliver these lectures were often seen as being:

(1) only half-hearted in their delivery,
(2) unwilling to change their lecture materials with any degree of frequency, and
(3) tied ritualistically to a textbook approach.[2]

These criticisms did not at first concern me greatly. Some lectures might fail to stimulate the student, but that, I thought, certainly was not always true. I concluded that lectures and lecturers needed only to be improved. Lectures could be made brief, more interesting, more stimulating, and more creative. They could contain fewer facts and more ideas. The information could be relevant; the organization, meaningful.

But when I considered what students really learned, even from the best lectures, I became disturbed. Even good lectures, I had to admit, placed the student in the role of a passive observer. All that students were really expected to do was to retain the facts and interpretations which the professor presented and then to comment on these during examination periods. The professor was the only one who had to be intellectually involved -- he did the talking; his students were largely acquiescent. Even in the good lectures, students were likely to acquire the following:

(1) exercise in note taking (stenographers got lots of practice),
(2) exercise in listening (though some brought tape recorders to class),
(3) encouragement to read textbooks and some paperbacks (though most read the outline series and master plots),
(4) exercise in memorizing facts (which rapidly were forgotten as soon as the course ended), and
(5) the habit of postponing their thinking (since students were responsible for thinking about the material primarily during examination periods).[3]

I had to agree with critics of the lecture method that students left these classes with notebooks full of facts and interpretations which they quickly forgot; that they learned to permit the professor to ask the questions, define the problems, select the reading materials and answer most questions; that, in short, they allowed the professor to do most of the thinking in class. They learned to lock themselves into an examination-oriented structure or else fail. Finally, they left the classroom having learned that if they wanted to know more about some aspect of history that interested them, they should take another history course. Since students would not be in the university all their lives, this meant that history was closing more doors to the past than it was opening.

Are these the results of our teaching? They do not sound like the much-vaunted "values" of studying history that we historians claim for our discipline. Can it be that we have denied our students the benefits of history by presenting them with the perfect birdhouse which we have built for them?

Discussion classes, I knew from experience, tended to be as bad as lectures for teaching history. Students refused to speak up. A few talkers dominated the class. The chaotic presentation of materials often left the students more confused than when they came in. Professors in these classes, just as they did in lectures, tried hard: they determined what were the best topics to be discussed and what were the best readings. Then like dentists, professors attempted to extract (often painfully) this same material from the mouths of reluctant students. The students were amazingly bored by the whole procedure. Too often they were expected merely to summarize the readings and to verify the professor's interpretation of them. While the professor spent most of his time in class trying to determine if any student had read his homework for the day, the members of the class became tense and embarrassed because they had not been motivated sufficiently to read the professor's selection of books. To avoid this dreadful situation, some historians, I knew, had given up trying to obtain student cooperation and turned reluctantly to lecturing again, concluding that students were just intellectually lazy. Students in the past have endured the professor-centered discussion or lecture classes quietly, but more recently they have made known their dissatisfaction.

Harvard students recently attacked the quality of instruction and the relevance of teaching in the university.[4] The University of North Carolina dropped the requirement of Modern Civilization for undergraduates, in part because of vocal student dissatisfaction. Articles in England and the United States have begun to appear with titles such as "History in Danger,"[5] and "Let's Abolish History Courses."[6] The American Historical Association's Newsletter has carried two important articles recently which sounded a warning note. In one article, "A High School Teacher Looks at College Teaching,"[7] Ira Marienhoff concluded that "College instruction has been atrocious and may be getting worse."[8] A generation had passed, he said, with "few signs of improvement" in the teaching of history.

> Twenty-five years ago, as an undergraduate, I was lectured to in enormous odea; three years ago, as a John Hay Fellow, I saw this generation of freshman and sophomores treated in like fashion. The significant change has been that the crowds are larger now, more restive, and much more critical than a generation ago.[9]

Warren Wager in another Newsletter described how the social sciences such as anthropology were beginning to take the place in the curriculum which history had long occupied in high schools.[10]

Why this dissatisfaction? Talking with several historians in Chapel Hill about the criticism of the survey courses at the University of North Carolina, I heard one argue that student dissatisfaction was the result of their anti-intellectualism. For some students this perhaps is true, but it is not the whole problem. Another professor indicated that student discontent was due to part-time instructors who frequently taught these courses; yet when high ranking professors tried teaching the survey, they too found that something was wrong. Why are students

so "turned-off" when a well qualified professor presents them with a scholarly, well-organized lecture based upon years of hard work and research? Why do they not appreciate what is being done for them? It is here that we have made a false assumption in the past.

Most of us have felt that if we presented students with logically organized lectures containing pertinent facts and interpretations, students would then hunger for knowledge about Latin America and we would have accomplished our objectives. Yet when we limit our teaching of history merely to disseminating information to students, we have hardly begun to teach.

Let's suppose we were to go into a hotel and walk up to an information desk.[11] And suppose the attendant immediately started spouting all of the pertinent facts and information one should know about the hotel. How would we react? Would we be patient and wait hoping the clerk might eventually hit upon a bit of information we needed? This is exactly what frequently happens when students walk into our courses. We immediately begin our presentation of pertinent facts and interpretations. It is like the hotel clerk asking his guests to wait until he has finished his presentation of all the pertinent facts about the hotel before we are permitted to ask if there is a vacancy. And what if the clerk described all of the problems of the hotel, those of the general manager, the house detective, etc.? Would this make the clerk's comments any more relevant? Yet many historians feel that information dissemination is legitimate if it deals with problems in history. This supposedly makes it relevant to the needs of the student. The study of history, however, is more than a body of information; it is more than a series of problems.

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I firmly believe that more emphasis should be given to historical methodology in our courses and that students should be pushed to the limits of their abilities to master the skills of the historian.

There are many worthwhile objectives that we should accomplish by our teaching. We should teach and students should study history in order that they might become historians. In medical school instructors devote themselves heart and soul to making doctors out of their students,[15] but students can graduate from colleges with a major in history and never really have done what historians do. This is the great indictment of the undergraduate and much of the graduate training in history departments today.

What do historians do? They read broadly, ask questions, seek out information, evaluate their findings, and attempt to place these into the correct historical perspective. What I am suggesting is that we permit our students the same opportunity to do what we have enjoyed doing. There is nothing in this process which students cannot do or should be prevented from doing, even if their first attempts do not result in a perfect understanding of the past. As an initial step in making historians out of his students, a professor should refrain from telling students what topics are to be researched and what questions must be answered. Students should be given an opportunity to determine what they feel is pertinent and meaningful to them. Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner have noted that "the most important intellectual ability man has yet developed -- the art and science of asking questions -- is not taught in /high/ school."[16] They could have included the university in this

statement. Rather than cultivating "questioning," "questing" minds,[17] historians have tried to cultivate "knowing" minds, and there is a significant difference.

Nothing can motivate a student, or an historian, more than a question which he really wants answered. Unfortunately, the typical classroom professor practices intellectual birth-control by discouraging questions or refusing to give most of the class-time to questions. Merely stopping in the middle of an hour lecture and asking if there are any questions is no solution. If anything, the silence which generally reigns at this point should indicate how much students really are thinking about what is being said in the lecture.

After the students are taught to frame their own questions they must learn how to secure sources of information. Students unfortunately learn to use the professor and his textbook as the sources of needed information. Most students are satisfied with a textbook answer, but professors should give them an opportunity to realize that the re-creation of the past is not simple, that many sources are necessary to provide what seemingly are simple facts. The professor should make the student aware of the danger of depending on too few sources. This leads to a third objective in teaching history.

Students need to learn how to view critically the sources they use. Once when Ernest Hemingway was interviewed, he was asked

> to identify the characteristics required for a person to be a "great writer." As the interviewer offered a list of various possibilities, Hemingway disparaged each in sequence. Finally, frustrated, the interviewer asked, "Isn't there any one essential ingredient that you can identify?" Hemingway replied. "Yes, there is. In order to be a great writer a person must have a built-in, shockproof crap detector."[18]

I do not believe "crap detectors" are "built-in." They are developed by good teachers. Students must be permitted to make mistakes in their

research. Professors who do most of the digesting of the materials for their students only keep them dependent upon themselves. The teaching of history should have as its objective the development of "an independent, self-propelling creature" who will not merely imitate or take instructions, but one who becomes "his own boss" and works to the limits of his abilities.[19] Teaching of history ought to have as its objective the teaching of critical thinking.

As professors we have traditionally felt that students were better off knowing our interpretations of the interpretations of the past than if the same students were to waste a great deal of time in class muddling through to a few conclusions of their own. But I believe that it is more important for students to want to know something (call it intellectual curiosity) and for them to have an opportunity to find answers to their questions than it is to fill them with overdoses of facts which a professor can only temporarily impose upon the mind of the student.

A fourth objective in teaching history is to make it possible for students to realize the values of the study of history. Those of us who were part of the American Historical Association's History Education Project attempted to set down some of these values. A student of history should come to realize that "events happen only once and in one way." He should learn how to organize and analyze knowledge about the past. He should accumulate data and insight which can aid him significantly if he choses to pursue the studies of the humanities and the social sciences. He should view "man as a creature whose society and whose being is historically conditioned." He should come to a "fuller understanding of present ideas, institutions, and ways of life" by investigating the origins and development of these in the past. The study of history should

enable the individual "to see and find himself in the perspective of time, and to know himself as one who has become what he is historically." He should be able to "develop a sense of social identity through learning the history of one's race, class, creed, religion, nation, civilization, or species." The study of history should have "intrinsic value;" in other words, it should be a source of pleasure for its own sake."[20]

What are the best teaching methods which make it possible for the student to realize these and/or other values from the study of history? My thesis is that the lecture method or the discussion approach -- if it is professor-centered -- will provide fewer opportunities for the students to realize the values of history. It is the professor, not the student, who currently derives most from his lectures. The professor has the pleasure of asking questions and seeking answers. It is he who learns how to organize and analyze knowledge. It is he who develops a fuller understanding of present ideas, institutions, and ways of life, and so forth. Why? Because the professor is more active, more involved than his students who are usually passive observers. Each professor should ask himself what his objectives are in teaching and he should experiment to find a way to ensure that his students benefit from the study of history.

In my own classes, I am currently following these procedures: (1) I present few lectures; those I do give are intended primarily to stimulate interest in an area and to give the student some feeling for the period; (2) I permit students to formulate the questions which they as a group would like to have answered during the course; (3) I challenge

them to find the materials which they think best answer their own questions; (4) they then spend the semester researching the various questions and discussing their findings in class; (5) I require of them a paper on a topic of their choosing; after their papers are corrected, the students revise and improve them.

The key to this approach is that the questions and the topics for discussion are relevant mainly because they are things which my students want to know. As they become involved in the attempt to answer their own questions, they establish an individual relationship with the subject matter. This is important because a student cannot find himself in history if he is not looking for himself. He cannot learn to think critically unless he is called on to do so. If we permit him to ask sufficient numbers of questions and if we insist that he pursue them in depth, he will develop an appreciation of what the study of history can mean to him as an individual.

The present crisis in history is primarily one which is affecting survey courses in the high schools and the universities. While Latin American history is not currently under direct attack, it cannot remain unaffected by the recent trends. Unless we personalize instruction as much as possible and teach the skills which historians have to offer, we may see our field decline as Latin American anthropologist, Latin American sociologist, Latin American political scientists, and Latin American economists teach all which some say one needs to know about Latin America. They claim the ability to teach all the history a student needs and to develop special skills at the same time. If

this is true, then history in general, and of Latin America in particular, has no unique value which will justify its existence in the curriculum. If it is false, then it is time we permitted our students to derive the benefits from the study of history to which they are entitled. But if our response to the crisis is only another lecture on how great is the study of history, I am afraid our cause is lost.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]Jacques Barzun, Teacher in America (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945. [Hereinafter cited as Barzun, Teacher in America.]

[2]These criticisms were gleamed from a variety of sources dealing with the lecture method in teaching in general and history teaching in particular. See: Charles G. Sellers, "Is History On the Way Out of Schools and Do Historians Care," Social Education, XXXIII (May, 1969), 509-516; Mary Price, "History in Danger," History, LIII (October, 1968), 342-347 [Hereinafter cited as Price, "History in Danger."]; Edgar Bruce Wesley, "Let's Abolish History Courses," Phi Delta Kappan, XLIX (September, 1967), 3-8 [Hereinafter cited as Wesley, "Let's Abolish History Courses."]; W. J. McKeachie, Research on Teaching at the College and University Level," in Handbook of Research on Teaching, ed. N. L. Gage (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1963), 118-1172; W. J. McKeachie, "How do Students Learn?" in R. M. Cooper, ed., The Two Ends of the Log (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), pp. 26-35; Encyclopedia of Educational Research, 4th ed., s.v. "History of Education;" Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, Teaching as a Subversive Activity (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969), passim [Hereinafter cited as Postman and Weingartner, Teaching as a Subversive Activity.]; G. R. Elton, The Practice of History (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967), passim [Hereinafter cited as Elton, The Practice of History.]; George Williams, Some of My Best Friends are Professors: A Critical Commentary on Higher Education (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1958), passim. [Hereinafter cited as Williams, Some of My Best Friends Are Professors.]

[3]Ibid.

[4]New York Times, September 19, 1969.

[5]Price, "History in Danger," pp. 342-347.

[6]Wesley, "Let's Abolish History Courses," pp. 3-8.

[7]Ira Marienhoff, "A High School Teacher Looks at College Teaching," A H A Newsletter, V (April, 1967), 13-16.

[8]Ibid., p. 14.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Warren Wager, "A Historian's Report from Bloomington," A H A Newsletter, VIII (December, 1969), 11-14.

[11]The inspiration for this example came from Alan Francis Griffin in "A Philosophical Approach to the Subject-Matter Preparation of Teachers of History," (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1942), p. 113.

[12]Elton, The Practice of History, pp. 144, 147.

[13]Edgar Dale, "New Techniques of Teaching," in R. M. Cooper, ed., The Two Ends of the Log (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), p. 204.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Barzun, Teacher in America, p. 203.

[16]Postman and Weingartner, Teaching as a Subversive Activity, p. 23.

[17]Williams, Some of My Best Friends Are Professors, p. 86.

[18]Postman and Weingartner, Teaching as a Subversive Activity, pp. 2-3.

[19]Barzun, Teacher in America, p. 21.

[20]"Values of Historical Study in School and College Curricula," (Mimeographed sheet) American Historical Association History Education Project, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, Summer, 1969.